

**COMMUNITY AWARENESS AND PREVENTION TEAM
ESSEX DISTRICT COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT STUDY
JUNE 2003**

Introduction

The Community Awareness and Prevention Team (CAPT) was initiated by Essex District Attorney Jonathan W. Blodgett. This program is designed to effectively marshal the collective resources of the communities of Essex County to fight and prevent crime. CAPT serves as a liaison between the District Attorney's Office and community leaders. Members of the team will meet regularly with police, school officials, faith-based organizations, business leaders, local elected officials, advocacy groups and others to discuss concerns, existing programs and needs. In this way, the team ensures that efforts are not duplicated and that the resources of the District Attorney's Office are used effectively and efficiently to address the specific needs of each community. Given the current fiscal crisis, the District Attorney's Office cannot allocate additional funds but can offer time, expertise and existing resources to assist communities in crime prevention efforts. While the first and most important job of the District Attorney is to prosecute crime, preventing crime is often the most cost effective way to fight crime. Awareness and knowledge create an environment where crime is more difficult to commit.

Beginning in February, 2003 through May 2003, CAPT members interviewed mayors, town managers, school superintendents, police chiefs, state representatives, senators and others. The purpose of this informal survey was to determine what crime-related problems exist in each community, what the community is doing to address these problems, and in what ways the District Attorney's Office can help to address these problems. The following is a summary of the findings.

Crime

According to the results of the study, the leading crimes in Essex County are: drugs, underage drinking, domestic violence and gangs. Drugs are a problem among both adults and juveniles and are considered to be at the root of most of the crime committed in the County including, but not limited to, domestic violence, gangs, house and car breaks. It is notable that drugs, underage drinking and domestic violence virtually cut a wide path throughout the County regardless of whether a community is urban, suburban, rural, affluent, middle class, lower-middle class, or in some areas poverty-stricken. These problems are widespread and police and school departments across the County are confronted with these and related crimes every day.

The issue of underage drinking and drug use is a major concern in most communities compounded by the disturbing fact that many parents seem to condone or turn a blind eye to these high-risk and illegal activities. One school's health department even suggests to students that drinking is acceptable as long as you do not drive while under the influence. In addition, there is confusion regarding the implementation and

efficacy of a zero tolerance policy on alcohol. Some police departments receive criticism from schools and parents when this policy is enforced. Several officials feel strongly that until an adult who procures alcohol for minors is prosecuted, nothing will change.

Domestic violence was highlighted in nearly every community. It is acknowledged that this is a growing problem and does not appear to be under control. In fact, it is trickling down to younger people with several school districts reporting a problem with teen dating violence. Essex County reflects the broader picture of domestic violence in that it touches people in all socio-economic levels and all races in communities across the County.

Gangs are problematic in the major urban centers of Lynn and Lawrence. Specialized units in the police departments of Lynn and Lawrence closely monitor gang activity. Even so, the school environment and general quality of life has been negatively impacted by the existence of gangs. Further, there is a spillover effect on the neighboring communities such as Salem, Beverly, Haverhill, Methuen and the malls in Peabody, Danvers and Saugus. It is certain that with gangs there are drugs, weapons, violence and other crime.

Many Essex County schools report an increase in bullying both face to face and on the Internet. While some schools have anti-bullying programs, there seems to be a need to extend to higher grades. Children are now using instant messaging to bully other children during off school hours, which then carries over to school hours with fights or harassment. As this issue becomes more prevalent, it increasingly drains limited police resources. School and police officials report that parents are very concerned about Internet safety.

Generally speaking the smaller communities reported problems with minor crimes such as motor vehicle violations, vandalism, noise and neighborhood disputes. While these are often considered minor crimes, they impact the community's quality of life.

Most communities recognized senior citizens' vulnerability to crime. Most police departments either have an officer assigned to senior citizens or conduct some form of outreach to seniors. Others work with local banks to track and report when a senior makes an unusual cash withdrawal.

Prevention

In most communities school departments and police departments have established positive working relationships, which contributes greatly to crime prevention. The schools that have a Student Resource Officer (SRO) give positive reports about their effectiveness and impact on the school environment. In many communities, police and schools work together to present forums on a variety of topics including drugs, Internet safety, anti-bullying and gangs. Also, there is collaboration between police and schools around prom and graduation time to keep kids safe. Obviously all communities are

concerned that the budget crisis will reduce police presence in schools, which everyone anticipates will have a detrimental effect on the school environment.

Schools and police also work through parent groups to offer programs on similar topics to parents. There is near universal frustration about reaching parents on important topics about their children's behavior. Educators and police both expressed a desire to improve parental outreach to better engage parents on these issues.

Community Collaborative Initiative (CCI) meetings are ongoing in nearly every community in the County. These meetings are mandated by law and facilitated by the District Attorney's Juvenile Justice staff. They involve school officials, police, Departments of Social Services, Youth Services, Mental Health and Probation. Through sharing information these meetings allow communities to ensure that children who are in trouble are getting appropriate services and that schools are aware of the problems their students face outside the classroom. These meetings have proven to be very effective.

Police departments, mayor's offices and other community leaders have developed a similar collaborative approach in some communities to address specific issues such as substance abuse or domestic violence. In addition police departments use task forces to address specific issues such as gangs, weapons, drugs and domestic violence. These task forces are useful in monitoring and preventing crime. For example, the Lynn Gang Unit has offered training and assistance to police, schools and parents in Salem and Beverly where gangs are emerging. The District Attorney's office supports this collaborative approach and where appropriate will work to expand this model to address other crime problems.

The District Attorney currently attends monthly Essex County police chiefs meetings. He uses these meetings to introduce various staff members, hear directly from chiefs about issues and concerns and share ideas on fighting and preventing crime. This aids the District Attorney in tracking issues and directing CAPT to address community concerns.

In several communities, senior citizens, Council on Aging staff, local police, the District Attorney's Office and the Essex County Sheriff's Department have formed a collaborative group called TRIAD. The purpose of the group is to work closely with seniors to help them recognize and report crime, defend themselves against crime and promote their safety.

Outcomes

As a result of these findings District Attorney Blodgett has directed his Community Awareness and Prevention Team to:

- develop a program to raise awareness of drugs, specifically heroin usage;
- work with police chiefs and school superintendents to develop a program to educate parents about liability issues related to underage drinking;

- develop a wider distribution network for a Domestic Violence brochure developed by the District Attorney's Victim/Witness Advocates;
- work with the District Attorney's Juvenile Justice staff to promote a Flashpoint program on gangs;
- work with the District Attorney to establish an Essex County superintendents' roundtable;
- maintain regular contact with community leaders and others; and
- work to expand identity theft awareness among senior citizens.

The team is currently:

- attending TRIAD and selected Council on Aging meetings and related events;
- attending community meetings such as Gloucester Inter-Agency Task Force, Healthy Gloucester Collaborative and Danvers Community That Cares;
- working with the Anti-Defamation League in several communities;
- working with the Department of Public Health and the Northeast Center for Healthy Communities;
- attending Community Collaborative Initiative meetings; and
- working with the District Attorney's Office to develop a website.

Conclusion

District Attorney Blodgett is committed to using his staff to work with communities to fight crime and develop sound approaches to prevent crime. This approach is especially important in the face of severe budget cuts for all municipal and state agencies. It is the goal of the District Attorney, through CAPT, to work with police, municipal officials and community organizations to most effectively use our limited resources to make Essex County safe for all of its citizens.